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ABSTRACT

Career opportunities for those seeking school principalships should be available if predictions are correct, yet many inexperienced principals will fail when confronted by the first challenges inherent in a position of educational leadership. This study reviews some of the major problems and issues that appear to be characteristics of the beginning years of the principalship. A series of recommendations strengthening the leadership contributions of incoming administrators are also made. The findings from intensive, indepth interviews conducted with 12 first- and second-year principals pertain to (1) role clarification problems and difficulty handling authority and responsibility; (2) technical expertise problems, both in procedural or technical expertise and in interpersonal skills; and (3) socialization to the profession and the system issues. Recommendations include (1) increasing future administrators' awareness of the fundamental features or "realities" of the principal's job; (2) providing opportunities to reflect on the actual purpose behind the skills of the job; (3) creating more specialized inservice training programs; (4) reducing feelings of isolation through a "buddy system" enabling the new principal to receive feedback; and (5) providing a more experienced principal to turn to for advice. Seventeen references and an appendix conclude the paper. (WTH)

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THE BEGINNING PRINCIPALSHIP: PRESERVICE AND INSERVICE IMPLICATIONS

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THE BEGINNING PRINCIPALSHIP:
PRESERVICE AND INSERVICE IMPLICATIONS

If the predictions of numerous state education agencies, professional associations for administrators, and university placement offices are accurate, the next few years should offer some excellent career opportunities for men and women who will be seeking elementary and secondary school principalships across the United States. Due to a variety of factors, including school board-sponsored "buy-outs" and other forms of incentives for early retirements, significant decreases in the number of people who will be initially entering the field of professional education, and increases in the student enrollments of some school districts, there will likely be a need for a substantial number of new principals in the foreseeable future (Daresh, 1986). Not all new principalships will be filled by people without any previous administrative experience; many open positions will attract present principals who wish to move to different schools, or assistant principals, supervisors, or other individuals not currently in principalships but having backgrounds in formal leadership roles. However, there will probably be a great influx of newcomers to the field of school administration. Thus, there will be some tremendous opportunities for school systems to find some new people who might begin the process of suggesting new ideas and new solutions to systems faced with many old problems. Unfortunately, there is a strong likelihood that many inexperienced principals will fail when confronted by the first challenges inherent in a position of educational leadership.

The focus of the study described in this paper was to review some of the major problems and issues that appear to be characteristics of the beginning years of the school principalship.

In addition, there will be a series of recommendations proposed for helping school district policy makers and others who are interested in the professional development and preparation of school principals to consider these characteristics and plan for strengthening the potential leadership contributions of incoming administrators. It would be unrealistic, of course, to believe that any analyses or set of recommendations could be formulated to ensure absolute success for individuals selecting a career in the principalship. Nevertheless, an assumption made here is that, insofar as the beginning principalship is concerned, more attention is better, and that this issue has been so generally overlooked in the literature that any attempt to clarify the conditions associated with more effective practice will be welcome.

The school principalship, in general, has recently been experiencing a "re-discovery" as the focus of considerable attention by numerous scholars (Barth, 1985). Ever since the school effectiveness movement proclaimed that the principal is a key component of productive schools (Edmonds, 1979; Brookover & Lezotte, 1980), there has been widespread and general acceptance of the view that the principalship is indeed worthy of much attention and support by theorists, researchers, and practitioners alike. In recent years, then, there has been increasing interest in describing the principalship in ways that help to understand the unique features of that role. Numerous studies have served to establish the fact that, while the behavior of principals might in fact be the single most important determinant of school effectiveness (Austin, 1979; Lipham, 1981), there are also important and unavoidable characteristics of the daily life of the building administrator which serve to prevent, or at least inhibit considerably, the ability of an individual to "make a difference" in his or her building (Peterson, 1984). As Mintzberg suggested in his study of the work of managers (1973), there is a need to view the school principal's job as one of mobility, fragmentation, and urgency. The problem with such an

analysis of the daily life of school building administrators is that it paints a picture of an environment where it is unlikely that someone can bring about school improvement and necessary change in a stable, wholistic, and calm fashion.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this paper are, first, to describe a recent study of the characteristics of first and second year principals in a midwestern state. Second, some of the major findings of this study will be summarized. Finally, based on these findings, implications concerning the inservice and continuing professional development needs that are experienced by beginning school principals are presented as a way to guide the efforts of future researchers as well as educational policy makers.

Design and Methodology of the Study

The basic methodology that was utilized to collect the data for this study consisted of intensive, in-depth interviews conducted of twelve first and second year principals. General background characteristics of each of the respondents are provided in Table 1. Participants were selected based primarily upon their willingness to be a part of this study and also their proximity to the researcher's home institution. Consequently, there is no suggestion here that a process of random selection of beginning principals was utilized. For the purposes of this study, however, the lack of generalizability that is normally a restriction in purposive samples was not viewed as a problem. Additional limitations concerning the choice of respondents, such as the fact that distinctions between elementary and secondary school principals were not used as a selection criterion, were noted and will be addressed later in this paper.

With two exceptions, the interviews which lasted from one to two

and one-half hours in length were conducted on-site at the principals' schools. Responses were sought to the following basic research questions that were used in each interview:

1. What are the surprises that you have experienced on the job so far?
2. What features of the principal's job have inhibited you from attaining the goals that you set for yourself when you first started?

The answers that were provided to these questions as well as numerous additional probing questions served as the foundation for the study findings which follow.

Findings

Due to the limited size of the sample, and the fact that participating principals were not included in the study as the result of a random selection process, caution must be exercised concerning the findings presented here, in terms of their generalizability. Also, the findings are based on the self-report statements of the principals. No effort was made to include perceptions of subordinates, peers, or superiors. Despite these limitations, however, the interviews of the principals are able to serve as an important indication of pressing concerns faced by beginning school administrators.

In general terms, principals reported problems and issues in three broad areas. These were role clarification, limitations on technical expertise, and difficulties experienced with socialization to the profession and to a particular school system. Each of these concerns is best understood by an examination of principals' specific responses.

Role Clarification

A common statement and observation made by the beginning administrators was related to their perception that they really did not know what the principalship was going to be like before they got into it. This seemed to be common to all respondents, even those who had served as assistant principals in the past. Regarding the principalship, all had studied it, watched it, read about it, talked about it, and as the result of the internships or planned field experiences required for certification in their state, even practiced it to some limited degree. They all admitted that they did not truly understand it, however. One of the specific deficiencies felt in this area was illustrated through the comments of one first year high school principal:

> I knew that I was supposed to be in charge, but I really was unprepared to deal with having real authority and leadership responsibility. I just wasn't comfortable with it at first.

What many of the principals seemed to be saying was that, while it was satisfying and pleasant to be called "the boss," few could imagine all of the responsibilities that were associated with that title until actually living in that role. Thus, a real and persistent problem faced by beginning school administrators involved the ability to comprehend clearly the precise nature of the new position. Incidentally, this was also a finding in the recent work of Weindling and Earley (1987) who studied the characteristics of first year secondary school heads in Great Britain:

> Despite having been told about various aspects and having worked with heads, the initial experience of being a head and sitting in the "hot seat" still came as a shock. It is difficult to prepare deputies for this aspect, as it obviously needs to be experienced firsthand. (p. 50).

Technical Expertise

Beginning principals also reported an uneasiness and feeling that they needed additional technical expertise to assist them in doing their jobs more effectively. When this issue was analyzed more thoroughly, it was observed that people were actually reporting two distinct kinds of technical expertise: Procedural or mechanical expertise, and expertise in the area of interpersonal skills. In the case of the first type, examples included rather normal "how to" concerns such as how to read computer printouts provided by the central office, how to address various legal issues, how to budget (both material resources and personal time), or how to implement, coordinate, or report system-specific mandates. An example of this last type of issue was provided by one elementary school principal who remarked:

> I really felt at a loss when I first got into the job--particularly with learning how to cope with all the forms they [the central office] wanted me to fill out at the start of the school year. I didn't know where to start! Thank goodness that the old advice about relying on a good secretary was true in my case.

The comments of this one principal were certainly not unique. In fact, if any one single area of beginning administrator concern could be classified as most powerful, this area of a perceived lack of technical expertise related to how to follow established procedures was it.

The list of problems faced by principals in the area of interpersonal skill development included such things as better conflict management skills, improved school-community relations skills, and decreased tensions with the teaching staff. As one beginning elementary school administrator who had just moved from the

role of the teacher to the principalship in the same school observed:

> I was really most surprised with the amount of conflict I saw everyday as part of my job--with kids, with parents, with the central office, and with the teachers. I couldn't seem to please everybody all the time, and I felt I should... It was really disappointing with the teachers--the people I was a part of only last year. Now they have little to do with me, except to get permission to do things, or for gripes.

Some of the principals also spoke of another type of need related to interpersonal skill development. That was a feeling that they believed that the people with whom they worked--teachers, staff, central office administrators, and community members--often had no concern for their own interpersonal needs. For example, several principals admitted to feeling a general sort of anxiety related to their job, attributable in their minds mostly to a sense of a lack of self-confidence. They never knew if they were really doing what was considered to be a good job, and no one in their schools or districts appeared inclined to provide much feedback or direction to help them understand how they were doing:

> People are not really reluctant to march into my office and tell me if they disagree with me. But no one says anything to me in terms of a general assessment of my performance. And particularly, no one marches in to say that they think I'm doing a great job!

This lack of feedback was an issue that principals felt from every level of the organization--superiors, peers, and subordinates. The generalization could be made that beginning principals felt that they lacked not only an information base concerning effective ways of handling situations with the people in their schools, but also strategies for gaining interpersonal support from others.

Socialization to the Profession and the System

The third major category of concerns facing beginning principals can be described as issues related to how people learn how to act in their new positions--socialization to the profession. Specific examples of needs and concerns in this category were somewhat less concrete than were the issues described in the two previous areas. Here, people seemed to be talking about their needs to learn more specifically "how to read" the signs of the systems in which they worked: How were principals (as generic roles) "supposed to" act? This was not limited solely to issues related to expected professional behavior--such as how to dress, whether or not to attend school board meetings, and which community organizations one was expected to join--although these concerns were indeed the implicit expectations felt in most districts that principals, regardless of the amount of experience, should somehow understand the proper routes to be taken to survive and to solve problems.

For example, one principal indicated that he felt rather foolish after following the procedures stated in the district policy manual regarding requests for new equipment for his building. Stated policy required formal application to an assistant superintendent for administrative services; the "real" way things happened was to deal directly with the director of buildings and grounds and not bother the assistant superintendent who was, in turn, too busy with other matters not listed in the policy manual. The new principal discovered this discrepancy between stated policy and real procedures only after talking to another, more experienced principal who noted that the request would probably gather dust and never be acted upon if "proper and normal" channels were followed.

Beginning principals, particularly if they came from districts other than the ones which subsequently employed them, felt vulnerable to the effects of a political and social system that they did not fully comprehend. This lack of "knowing the ropes" in a particular

school or district was no small concern to first and second year administrators who desperately vanted to feel as if they could be successful in the system.

The list of specific concerns, needs, interests, feelings of deficiency, and other vants of beginning principals is a long one indeed. This attempt to organize a variety of individual items into three major categories is not meant in any way to trivialize the importance of any specific issue voiced by one or more respondents. Nevertheless, even in this simplified listing of problems encountered by beginning administrators, it is clear that much time, energy, and talent is spent trying to respond to particular concerns. The assumptions might then be made that, if strategies could be developed to minimize the impact of these issues, principals might be able to be more attentive to duties that would increase the effectiveness of their schools.

Implications and Discussion

The above observations concerning some general categories of concerns faced by first and second year principals offer some opportunities for changing existing policy and practice. These changes, in turn, can enable administrators in the earliest stages of their careers to enjoy more satisfying and successful experiences.

First, existing approaches to what is commonly referred to as "experiential learning," (i.e., practica, field experiences, and internships) utilized in the preservice preparation of principals are generally not sufficient in their ability to enable people to experience the world of administration before they take their first job. Currently, such activities for training future administrators usually consist of situations where aspiring principals, in most cases full-time teachers unable to get district support and approval for released time, find some administrative tasks that can be

performed during time that is not assigned during the school day to teaching or other duties. As a result, people are being prepared to serve as educational leaders by spending five to ten hours per week supervising bus loadings, calling the homes of truant students, filling out forms for the central office or the state department of education, or devising new student handbooks. Instead, people need a different type of practicum, an opportunity to get not only a glimpse of the principal's world, but also a chance to live in that world and actually be held accountable for decisions that are made. Such a learning experience would be a more useful way to help women and men understand more precisely what it is that they are getting into for a career. Learning to be a principal by engaging in field activities must go beyond the current ritual of allowing aspiring building administrators to practice limited skills in the field. Instead, the focus must be placed on increasing future administrators' awareness of some of the fundamental features, or "realities" of the principal's job noted by Barth (1980): Imbalance of responsibility and authority, isolation on the job, time constraints, and continuing competing expectations for service as a building manager as contrasted with the duty of being an instructional leader.

In addition to increasing the types of experiences to which the aspiring principal will be exposed as part of his or her preservice field work and practicum, work must also be done to ensure that such practice will actually serve as opportunities for true experiential learning. Kendall and her associates (1986) with the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education noted that experiential education is something that goes well beyond merely providing people with places to watch and learn from others doing activities in "real-life" settings. Instead, it is necessary to go beyond "hands-on" learning to include an opportunity for the learner to engage in considerable reflection regarding the purpose of the skills being learned, as well as the ways in which the skills might "fit" with her or his understanding of and personal definition of

administration in general. Rarely do existing preservice preparation programs for principals include sufficient opportunity for future administrators to step back from the acquisition of knowledge and skills to wonder, "Why?" (Daresh, 1986). Enabling individuals to engage in this type of activity would be a significant improvement in the programs that were followed by the principals included in this study who indicated that, for the most part, they were surprised at seeing themselves in the principal's office. They knew about the job without ever really thinking if it was the job they wanted.

Another suggestion derived from this study was that specialized inservice training for beginning administrators needs to be developed and targeted for the interests of this particular group of school leaders. New administrators indicated that they needed more information about such mechanical, technical issues as law, school finance, teacher evaluation policies and procedures, computer applications in education, and other similar issues and daily, practical concerns related to running schools on a day-to-day basis. Workshops, seminars, and training institutes of short duration can be designed to address beginning administrators perceptions that they need more information concerning these topics and also the technical expertise related to interpersonal skill development and refinement. Thus, training programs that introduce alternative ways of dealing with stress, managing (but certainly not erasing) conflict, improving conference skills, or increasing strategies to be utilized to enhance the quality of home-school-community relations may be effective and have a significant impact on the ability of principals to work with the people who are in and around their schools. Such training programs might be provided from a number of different sources, including the school districts that employ the beginning principals, professional associations for school administrators, or even local universities that would view their administrative preparation programs in terms of a mission that would include inservice as well as preservice education.

Another implication for the improvement of practice derived from this study of beginning principals is that ways need to be found to ensure that, wherever possible, new administrators are not left totally alone to solve their problems in isolation from their colleagues. We already know that a serious problem for classroom teachers is that they spend a high percentage of their time isolated from their co-workers (Lieberman & Miller, 1984). The non-existence of collegial support on the job is indeed a negative aspect of how things tend to happen in most schools. While this is clearly a problem for classroom teachers, this lack of a norm of collegiality is also a major shortcoming that plagues the principalship (Jackson, 1977; Barth, 1980). To address this issue, principals (both new and experienced) might be encouraged to work together in pairs in a sort of "buddy system" that would enable them to have at least one other person in the school system who could be available for advice and provide consistent, honest feedback concerning job performance. Furthermore, structured opportunities for greater collegial support in inservice activities such as the Peer-Assisted Leadership (PAL) program conceptualized and developed by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (Barnett, 1985), or the Principals' Inservice Program sponsored by /I/D/E/A/ and housed at the University of Cincinnati (LaPlant, 1979) hold considerable promise as activities which have the objective of reducing the feelings of isolation which so often restrict building principals from being as effective as they might be.

Finally, beginning principals need patient mentors who are available to talk about concerns that arise as part of the job. One of the principals interviewed during this study reported frustration over trying to understand the norms in her school district regarding such a seemingly trivial issue as expectations regarding principals' attendance at monthly school board meetings. A senior principal explained to her the types of agenda items where the superintendent normally expected principals to attend as a supporting cast, and

which kinds of items did not typically call for the same sort of symbolic support through attendance. The new principal then became quite skillful in reading the signs of the district. Because people in any organization are often judged according to their ability to read and interpret correctly what are often very subtle signs and signals, it is quite likely that the intervention of a trusted colleague as a wise aide in assisting the beginning principal in understanding the superintendent's unstated expectations was a way of ensuring some greater success. This example, then, is typical of the hundreds of situations that arise in the life of a new school principal which might, in turn, have a great impact on a person's career.

Summary and Concluding Comments

In this paper, limitations on the effectiveness and leadership potential of first and second year principals were described according to the ways in which beginning principals explained restrictions on their ability to do the job they wanted to do when they were first hired. Local school districts, universities, state education agencies, and administrator's professional associations were all suggested as organizations with a legitimate stake in the business of trying to assure that beginning administrators will achieve some degree of success on the job.

The research reported in this paper, due in some degree to a number of limitations, is but a first step at learning more about a rather significant issue in professional education, namely the problems faced by principals who have just started their careers. For one thing, the sample of principals selected for inclusion in this study is admittedly quite small and restricted to a narrow geographic region. In addition, no attempt was made to find a truly random sample. Further studies will need to investigate a broader

range of beginning administrators across the nation and in a much wider variety of settings--urban, rural, and suburban school systems. Second, no effort was made to direct this study toward probable distinctions that may exist between elementary ands secondary school administrators. There is little doubt that such an analysis would show some differences between the issues faced by beginning high school principals as contrasted with elementary school administrators. The simple fact that secondary schools are typically so much larger and complex than elementary buildings would no doubt change the complexion of some of the issues faced by principals. In this initial review of the beginning principalship, however, it was not felt that anything more than a general overview of the issue was needed. Clearly, future studies will need to examine the unique characteristics of beginning principals as they may be associated with unique features of their schools as organizations. It will only be through this type of analysis that the research base in this area will be as useful as it might be. Finally, as it was noted earlier, this study sought responses and perceptions only from the beginning principals themselves. A future, richer perspective on this topic will be available if views can also be gained from others who observe the performance of principals. What, for example, do teachers see as major changes that occur in their buildings as the result of the activities of the beginning principal?

The only way to maximize the talents of people in any organization is to assume that talents truly exist in those people in the first place, and that everything that can be done to help beginning administrators will be done. It is likely that every school system employing a new principal has great expectations for the success of that individual. It is not always clear that everything is in fact being done to ensure that success. This and additional future studies are needed to pinpoint the nature of what beginning principals believe to be their greatest achievements as well as their major frustrations. It is through this line of inquiry

that ways may be discovered to assist leaders in overcoming some of the first and highest hurdles they will face in the path toward greater personal and organizational effectiveness.

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APPENDIX I

PRINCIPAL	SEX	AGE	LEVEL OF SCHOOL	POSITION PREVIOUS YEAR
1	F	27	Elementary	Teacher
2	F	30	Elementary	Teacher
3	F	34	Elementary	Assistant Principal
4	M	36	High School	Supervisor
5	M	32	High School	Assistant Principal
6	M	30	Middle/Junior High	Principal1
7	F	33	Middle/Junior High	Teacher
8	F	28	Elementary	Supervisor
9	M	41	High School	Graduate Student2
10	M	29	Middle/Junior High	Teacher
11	F	31	Elementary	Principal3
12	M	33	High School	Assistant Principal

TABLE 1. Selected background characteristics of the beginning principals.

1 Named principal mid-way through the previous year. Had been an assistant principal.

2 Prior to entering a full-time graduate program, had been an assistant principal.

3 Was a classroom teacher two years ago.